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Jean-François Breton

## To cite this version:

Jean-François Breton. Architecture. Queen of Sheba. Treasures from Ancient Yemen. Edited by St John Simpson, pp.142-152, 2000. hal-02197406

**HAL Id: hal-02197406**

**https://hal.science/hal-02197406v1**

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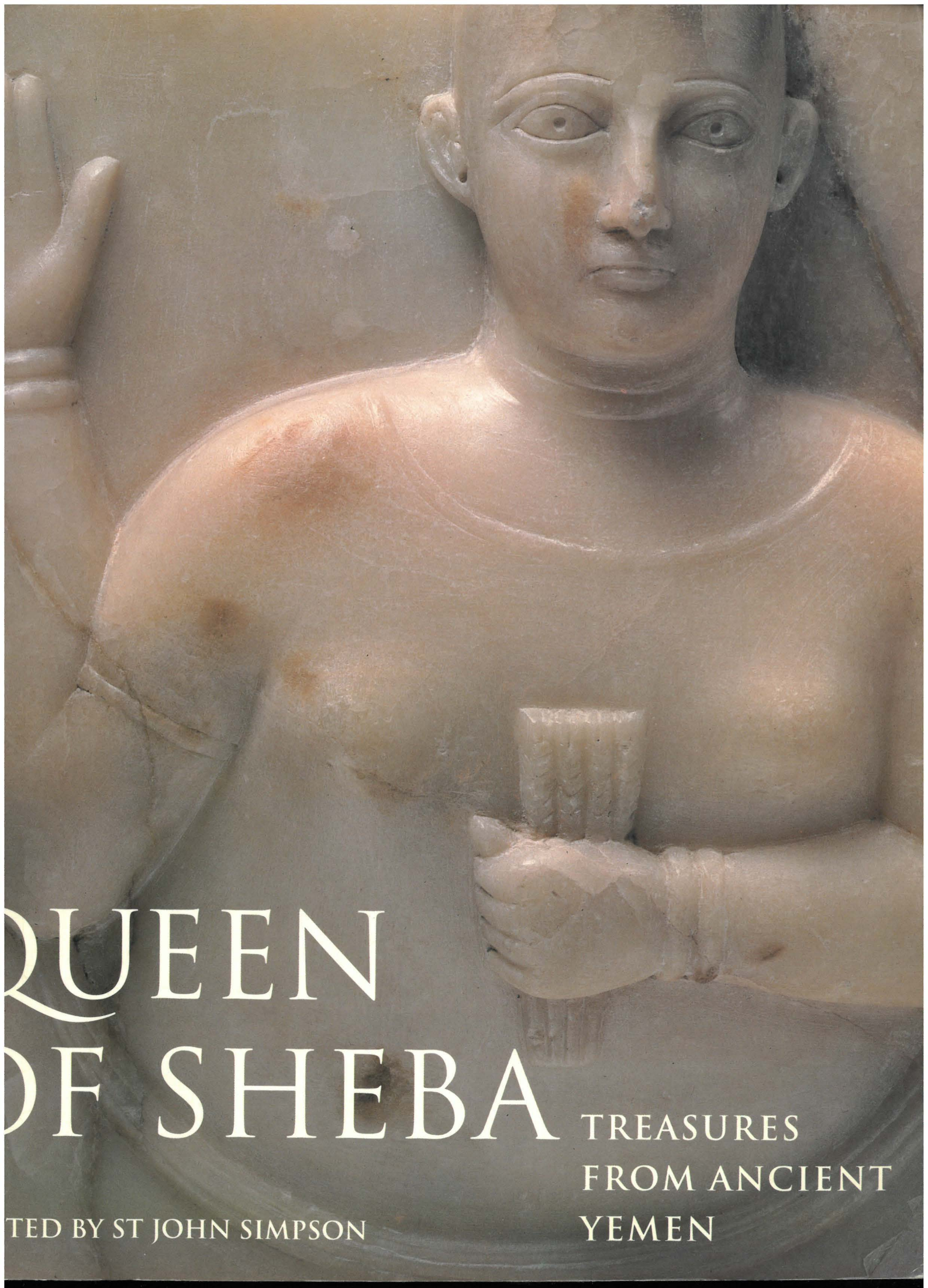
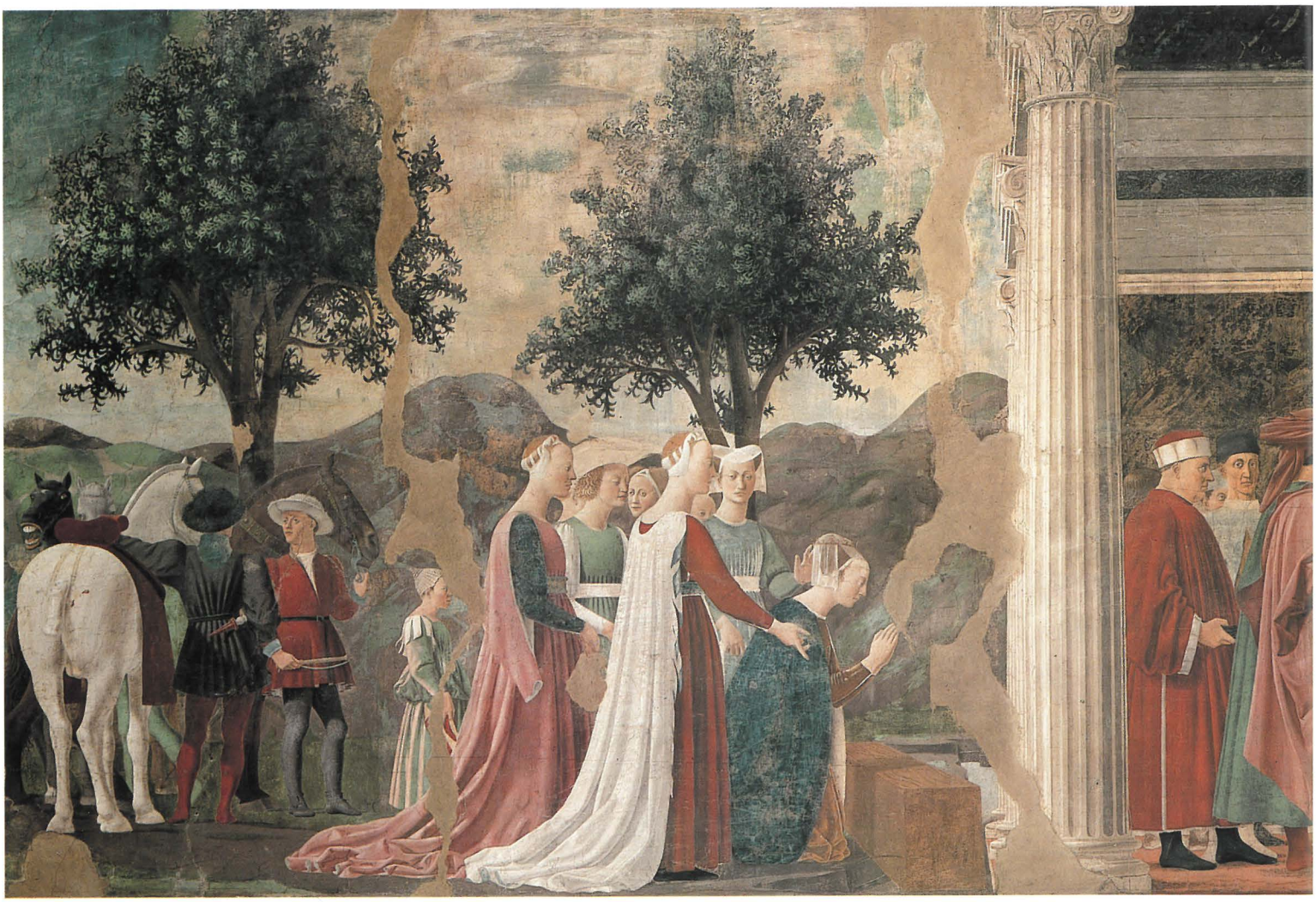


# QUEEN OF SHEBA

## TREASURES FROM ANCIENT YEMEN

TED BY ST JOHN SIMPSON

# QUEEN OF SHEBA



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First published in 2002 by The British Museum Press
A division of The British Museum Company Ltd
46 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1B 3QQ

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library
ISBN 0 7141 1151 1

Designed by Harry Green
Typeset in Garamond
Printed in Spain by Grafos SA, Barcelona

HALF TITLE See cat. 142.
TITLE PAGE See fig. 14, p. 54.
ABOVE See fig. 12, p. 37.

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CHAPTER

9

# Architecture

JEAN-FRANÇOIS BRETON

All these cities are ruled by monarchs and are prosperous, being beautifully adorned with both temples and royal palaces. (Strabo 16.4.3)

The tradition of constructing monumental architecture developed in ancient South Arabia as a direct result of wealth created by the long-distance incense trade which stimulated massive building projects such as the construction of city walls, palaces and temples.[1]

## An indigenous architecture

From the eighth century BC, a new architectural tradition with construction in stone appears in the Sabaean heartland of Mārib, as well as in the Jawf valley about 100 km to the north-west. The distinctive character of this architecture has often led to questions as to how far these buildings can be considered to be of local inspiration or how far they instead reflect foreign influence. The number of countries trading in the area may explain the range of possible influences exerted over South Arabia. Egypt was first suggested as a source of influence because of the use of hard limestone monoliths, each weighing 2 to 4 tons, carefully polished and engraved, plus the use of the Egyptian cubit (52.5 cm) and the popularity of an irregular chiselled oblique form of dressing.[2] The use of recesses casting light and shadows on the façades and smaller embedded panels imitating wooden window frames may also have been borrowed from the Egyptians, although the latter is a feature also found in Urartian and Achaemenid architecture.[3] Possible Iranian influence may also be seen in the use of stone basements supporting high mudbrick superstructures, as in the case of Achaemenid palaces at Persepolis and Susa,[4] whereas during the seventh century BC city walls were constructed of mudbrick with an outer wall of stone, which may have been a feature copied from Assyria.[5] However, none of these hypotheses seem particularly convincing.

Apart from these building techniques, architectural formulae appear to have been few in number. The wealthy houses shared the same plan, with a high stone basement measuring some 10 × 12 m supporting a wooden frame. The simplest form of temple had an open-air courtyard with rooms at one end, whereas in later periods more elaborate temples were constructed, with a high central building and a lower courtyard surrounded by porticoes. The same formula seems to have been applied to sanctuaries such as the Bar'ān Temple in Mārib, and palaces like the so-called TT1 at Tamna' and the palace at Shabwa.[6] Monumental propylea with five to seven pillars and upper panels decorated with projections (dentils) are generally associated with these religious buildings and appear to belong to a local architectural tradition. It may thus be assumed that the first temples, at least in the Jawf, are largely the work of local builders operating independently of styles abroad.[7]

All these features are common in South Arabian cities during the first millennium BC. Buildings are massive, flat-roofed and rectangular in plan. Their outlook seems rather severe, particularly in the Sabaean areas with only dentils, red painted inscriptions, alabaster panels and some bronze plaques. Statues of gods were uncommon, if not prohibited, and stone sculpture in the round appears to be rather clumsy.

## Building techniques

Another original feature lies in the building techniques of the Jawf from the eighth century BC, where there is extensive evidence for the use of regularly coursed ashlar masonry, walls constructed with a single horizontal row of stretchers, blocks with tapered backs, careful dressing of the faces and particular attention paid to the bonded quoinings in the angles. The best evidence for marginally drafted and pecked masonry can be seen in the tombs south of the Awwām temple at Mārib, the south-east tower at as-Sawdā' and the fortifications at Kamna.[8]

One of the characteristics of South Arabian building is the effective combination of wood, limestone and

FIG. 46 View of the 'Royal Palace' at Shabwa. (*Photo: B. Vogt*)

mudbrick, although the use of these materials is not unique to southern Arabia. Mudbrick was required to construct terraced foundations for stone buildings. In the case of urban fortifications, a mudbrick core was erected at the same time as an outer stone wall, the two being linked by stone stretchers. Wood was used not only as a lacing reinforcement against earthquakes but also to provide a structural framework for the walls. Stone, particularly limestone, remained a vital component for centuries, implying the existence of a large and skilled workforce qualified to rough out, load, quarry and undertake the final dressing of the stonework. The masons involved have left hundreds of marks on the blocks and it is suspected that these craftsmen were of a high social status.[9] Some of them, specifically the *garbay* (*grby*), who were well known in the city of Raybūn in the central Ḥaḍramawt, may be traced back over four generations.[10]

The most striking example of building techniques is the framework. Long beams, cross-pieces, wall plates and posts were combined to construct a framework 1.5 m high and 0.45 m wide. Two frames make a 2.5-m top floor. The frame was then infilled with mudbricks and earth. The outer face was covered with a limestone slab, sometimes decorated with a geometric pattern, as in the case of the palace at Shabwa, or engraved with *ex votos*, as in the temples at Raybūn.[11]

## Houses and palaces

Most buildings were houses. Those constructed within hamlets and villages scattered through an oasis were built using local materials but according to different traditions. In the Ḥaḍramawt and the Jawf mudbricks were used to construct the walls and benches, palm trees were used for the ceilings and mud plaster for the surfaces, which were occasionally painted red. Examples of such houses have also been excavated in the towns of Ḥurayḍah[12] and Shabwa, but most houses in the Bayḥān and Mārib areas were built of drystone. Hundreds of small houses have been recorded measuring up to 100 sq. m, but some 'villas' in the Wādī Surbān, east of Bayḥān, range from 250 to 400 sq. m, suggesting the presence here of wealthy landowners.[13]

Generally, the housing within the main cities was very different in appearance and anyone wandering across the ruins of these cities is struck by the use of high stone basements with regular internal partition walls. These basements presently survive to a height of about 3–5 m and are completely eroded, but they originally supported wooden floors. The first examples of this form of domestic architecture to be discovered were at Shabwa. In 1938 Major R.A.B. Hamilton spent some six weeks excavating at this site. Following a lecture Hamilton subsequently delivered at the Royal Geographic Society on the results of his work, Sir Leonard Woolley suggested that the ancient houses were like the modern mud-built 'skyscrapers' in the Ḥaḍramawt, the height of which is up to 20 m at Shibām, a suggestion confirmed by the more recent French excavations in 1978.[14] Many ancient South Arabian building inscriptions indicate the number of floors within houses as three or four, with up to six in Ẓafār.[15] These inscriptions also provide the name of the owners, for instance 'Rafa'an son of Shafay and Way'il, son of Ghawtham . . . built his house Yafad'[16] or 'Hawfi'amm son of Thawnab . . . erected his house Yafash' (in Tamna').[17] In addition, Muhabyah, Atkan son of Manakhum, is said to have 'repaired his palace Ahdathan, from the foundations to the top, six levels with six floors . . .', thus each tower-house vouches for the prestige of these noble families.[18] These dwellings were fortified with small openings or loopholes and they all appear to have participated in the city defences, even when it was walled, additionally offering on occasion protection to a specific point of the city, such as the palace positioned near the main northern gate of Shabwa (fig. 46).[19]

Usually, these tower-houses were located in the urban centres, either small towns – the smallest being S'na in the Ḥaḍramawt, which covers an area of only 2.7 ha – or the capitals themselves. The number of such buildings in a town varied from around 60 in Hinū az-Zurayr (ancient Ḥarībat) or 80 in Najrān, to as many as 250 at Shabwa. It is possible to use these figures to provide an estimate of population size in these towns as there were some 20 to 25 houses to the

FIG. 47 General view of the city site of Shabwa. (*Photo: J.-F. Breton*)

hectare. At Shabwa, for instance, the total of 250 tower-houses, with an estimated average of 10–15 inhabitants each, allow an estimated population total of 2,500–4,000 people (fig. 47), although the total population of the ancient city of Mārib was probably twice this number as its sophisticated irrigation system enabled the cultivation of a larger oasis and thus increased carrying capacity.[20]

The most impressive excavated tower-house is the so-called 'Royal Palace' at Shabwa, which was thoroughly investigated by the French Archaeological Mission between 1976 and 1985.[21] It was constructed over an earlier building dating approximately to the tenth century BC and later incorporated within the city walls. At the beginning there was a tower-house above a lower U-shaped building with a central courtyard. The area is about 56 m × 40 m. During the first phase of construction a small building surrounded by benches was erected in the centre of the courtyard. After its destruction new rows of seats were built in front of the portico and the courtyard came to resemble a 'theatron'. All of these buildings were destroyed at first by a Sabaean attack in AD 225, the details of which are reported in a long text from Mārib.[22] This records how a small Sabaean detachment conquered the building, which was called Shaqār, but became trapped inside for thirteen days until they were finally rescued by the Sabaean army. After the battle the city of Shabwa was sacked and burned, but some years later the palace was completely rebuilt. The height of the U-shaped building was now increased by one storey, with a gallery illuminated by windows supported by stone mullions. Its ground floor was decorated with classical frescoes. The main tower-house was also reconstructed, albeit slightly differently to the previous arrangement, with wooden posts in the main porch and black stone ibex friezes; the central porch was adorned with two bronze locks and iron nails.

This palace was finally destroyed by fire during the fifth century AD. Among the different destruction layers about 300 pieces of wood were discovered which allow a precise reconstruction of the appearance of the interior of this building. For instance, short boards had been employed to build coffered ceilings with thin alabaster sheets, thus resembling the *velum* (veil) found in the centre of Roman house ceilings in Alexandria. Some of these boards were painted red with dentils or were used as windows and door frames.[23] Until now no other excavation has provided such a range of architectural elements. According to Strabo, South Arabian 'houses, in the mode of binding the timbers together, are like those of Egypt'.[24] Although it may seem strange, excavations in the 1940s revealed that Ptolemaic houses in the Nile delta or in the Fayūm oasis used large

FIG. 48 The southern towers of the wall at Barāqish. (*Photo: J.-F. Breton*)

timber-framing.[25] Some of these dwellings are similar to tower-houses and are sometimes shaped as clay models or depicted in the 'Nilotic landscape' mosaics from Egypt.[26] On the western side of the Red Sea in Tigray it was common to use wooden posts and frames before the sixth century BC, as recorded in Grat Be'al Gebri, and some centuries later Aksumite palaces continued to require large quantities of wood for their walls.[27]

### City walls

As far as is known, ashlar masonry was not used for the construction of city walls in the Ramlat as-Sab'atayn desert region before the first millennium BC. Therefore, in the Yemeni highlands small settlements such as Hammat al-Qa were topping ridges and peaks from the Bronze Age (2200–1400 BC), but these lacked mudbrick or ashlar fortifications.[28] In the lowlands there were very few Bronze Age fortifications except possibly the site of Diaw in the Wādī Khawra. During the proto-Sabaic period (1200–800 BC), some settlements such as Hajar ar-Rah near Bayḥān consisted of a ring containing a small number of houses connected by walls. As these sites resemble 'enclosed settlements' found in southern Palestine and the Negev, it has been proposed that they may belong to small social groups which originated in north-west Arabia. However, even if these groups did migrate from there, it seems very unlikely that they would have changed the whole socioeconomic face of southern Arabia.

In the very beginning of the first millennium BC most settlements consisted of a ring of houses joined by a single or double wall. In these cases each house played an important part in the defence of the whole system. This archaic system lasted for a long time and in some areas, such as the Qatabanian kingdom, it survived for a millennium. Cities such as Tamna', Ḥarībat (modern Hinū az-Zurayr) and Hajar adh-Dhaybiyya (in the Wādī Ḍura') were defended by dozens of tower-houses built of wood and thus were rather easy to burn down. In other sites such as Yala or Ḥizmat Abū Thawr in the Wādī Jawf, the former defensive ring was replaced by a city wall. It is clear now that the first kings erected stone fortifications around most of these settlements.[29] Therefore the city wall appears to be a hallmark of the Sabaean state from the seventh century BC. Centuries later, small groups of 'Arab' nomadic tribes arriving in Yemen were establishing new enclosed settlements with a circle of small houses built around a central space. Many sites inside the Wādī Markha, such as Hajar Talib or Hajar Lajiyya, belong to this period of the first century BC to the second century AD.[30]

The earliest ashlar masonry fortifications date to the seventh century BC, exemplified by those at Kamna, as-Sawdā' (in the Jawf) and Mārib. Kamna is unique in that the walls crown a 13-m high tell. Its fortification was constructed with two horizontal rows of stretchers with no inner mudbrick wall. Elsewhere the normal method was to have a single horizontal row of stretchers connected by headers to a mudbrick wall.[31] This ashlar masonry façade shows major discontinuities due to long stretchers (*c.* 1.2–1.80 m) and short headers (0.30–0.40 m). These blocks were finely dressed with marginal drafting. Behind the wall, all the fittings, floors, staircases and covered ways were constructed of wood. Most cities have long curtain walls, slightly projecting towers of the same height and simple gateways, but lack strongholds and glacis, except in the case of Tamna' and Hajar adh-Dhaybiyya.[32] The surfaces of the walls were inscribed, either with the names of the Sabaean *mukarrib*, as at al-Bayda', or of the tribal chiefs, as at Barāqish or Ma'īn, but unfortunately, few texts give the name of the tower or curtain wall. The taxes and the amount of money paid for the work are also seldom recorded and the financial organisation of these massive public works thus remains uncertain. Large inflows of money could explain the quality of construction, whereas cash flow problems or other crises may explain unfinished work, as in the eastern towers at Ma'īn.

Finally, the question remains as to why these fortifications were constructed (fig. 48). With their high walls, which measured 8–15 m in height, and their massive towers, it seems unlikely that any could have been successfully assaulted or destroyed by artillery and, indeed, it is most unlikely that South Arabian armies in the first millennium ever possessed such equipment. The only opportunity would have been to besiege the city and hope to cut its water or food supplies in order to force a surrender.[33] Alternatively, the function of these walls may have been political or to enhance prestige, since they acted as urban political landmarks (*hajar*) in the oases. The peasants, nomads and shepherds were thus outside the wall, whereas the tribal, religious and commercial authorities were within; in this respect it is significant that the main 'caravan cities' such as Ma'īn, Barāqish, Mārib and Shabwa were encircled by the most prestigious fortifications.

### Temples

Temples are the best documented buildings in South Arabia as they have been the focus of the most excavation (figs 49, 50). From 1928, the Huqqa temple north of Ṣana'ā' was excavated by C. Rathjens and H. von Wissmann;[34] and the temple at al-Ḥurayḍah (central Ḥaḍramawt)[35] and the Awwām temple in Mārib were excavated in 1938 and 1951 respectively.[36] After this date, when it became possible to undertake scientific excavations in Yemen, the following sites were excavated: the main sanctuary at Shabwa between 1976 and 1978; the Ba'qutfa sanctuaries in eastern Ḥaḍramawt and the 'Athtar temple in as-Sawdā' between 1988 and 1989; and the Awwām and Bar'ān temples in Mārib.[37] These different excavations have provided a great deal of information about building techniques and architectural formulae but sadly little about personal beliefs or rituals.

Generally, temples were small, only measuring 15–25 m in length. They were usually rectangular with a central courtyard, an adyton and cellae; only one temple at as-Sawdā' included a funerary chamber. Cities had one or more temples inside the city walls and at least one beyond. Even where the extramural temple was dedicated to the same gods as the urban one, it was mainly destined for use by rural tribespeople and caravaneers. Current research indicates that the earliest temples are situated:

- in the Jabal Balaq near Mārib, where there are small buildings with three cellae, some associated with rooms with benches as at Dish al-Aswad;[38]
- in the Mārib oasis, where the earliest phase of the Bar'ān Temple may go back to the ninth century BC and consists of a massive square building, although only partially excavated;
- in the Jawf, where some sanctuaries were erected outside the cities of as-Sawdā', Ma'īn, Haram and Kamna. All four temples have a monumental entrance opening onto a courtyard with porticoes. The gateway and porticoes are covered with carefully dressed heavy slabs. In a unique feature fifteen uninscribed trapezoidal stelae are placed against the walls of the entrance, the gateway and beneath the porticoes. As in Egypt, polished monoliths some 5 m high are entirely covered with rows of engravings showing, from bottom to top, snakes, ibexes, spear-shaped trees, figures, more snakes and ibexes and long-stemmed flowers. Small female figures standing on pedestals wear long dresses; their hair is arranged on either side of their shaven heads, and they carry long bent rods (see cat. 188). Another Minaean temple displays standing figures, some wearing loincloths, carrying sticks, lyres or bows and walking in procession.

Out of these four temples only that at as-Sawdā' has been completely excavated and dates back to the eighth century BC. Its four main dedications, including ''Abamar Sadiq has built the Temple of 'Athtar' (texts SW-BA 1 and 2) and ''Abamar Sadiq has consecrated

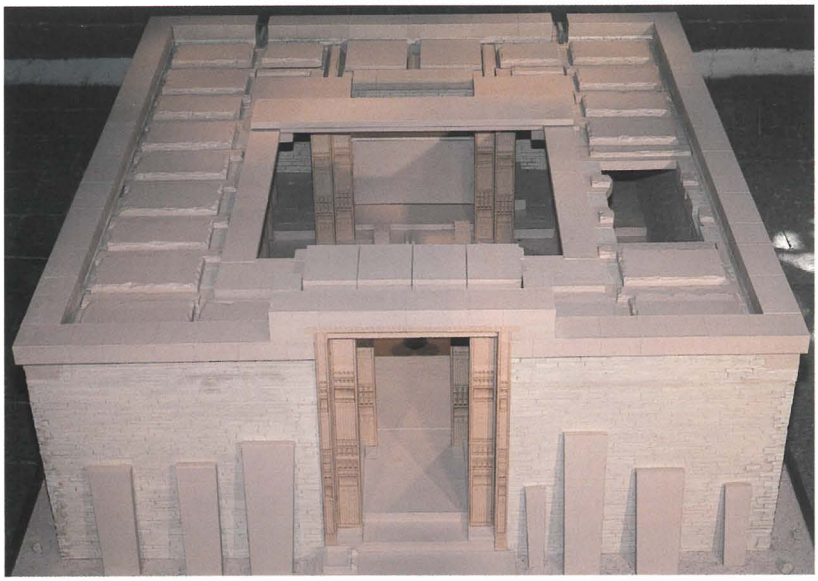


FIG. 49 Model of the 'Athtar temple, as-Sawdā. (*Photo: J.-F. Breton*)

FIG. 50 The 'Athtar extramural temple, Ma'īn. (*Photo: J.-F. Breton*)

During the subsequent seventh and sixth centuries BC two series of sanctuaries were erected in the Jawf and in the Ḥaḍramawt. In the Jawf the open-air courtyard became a fully covered cella with rows of stone pillars buttressing the roof, with the addition of a monumental porch supported by pillars and a triple flight of steps in front of the main entrance. One of these sanctuaries, excavated by an Italian mission in Barāqish, was dedicated to the god of healing, Nakraḥ.[42]

In the Ḥaḍramawt valley and its tributaries, temples were built on high stone footings which supported timber-framed walls. The dhāt-Kafash temple in Raybūn is made up of a central hall with wooden pillars and a flight of stone steps leading to a high podium at the far end. In one corner there was a limestone staircase leading up to a flat terrace where cult practices involving incense burning are thought to have been held. It is worth noting that some of the sanctuaries of Hajar Yahirr, Kuhayla and Tamna' were flat-roofed like some Syro-Palestinian temples, such as that of Bel in Palmyra. The Russian mission has excavated the Hadran temple in Raybūn dedicated to 'Athtar from which come some 500 fragmentary *ex votos* engraved on stone slabs.[43] In the nearby Mayfa'an temple many members of different families thanked the god Siyyan for healing their eyes or skin diseases.[44]

All the cities of the Ḥaḍramawt were dominated by the Temple of 'Athtar' (SW-BA 3 and 4), are engraved with pre-geometric letters.[39] On the pillars of the courtyard some texts with more classical characters give the names of 'Sumhuyafa' Yasran, son of Lub'an, King of Nashān, and his three sons Yada''ab 'Amar, Ma'dīkarib and Dadkarib.[40] The 'Sumhuyafa' Yasran, son of Lub'an' is known mainly through the Ṣirwāḥ inscription relating the Sabaean expansion under Karib'īl Watār, son of Dhamar'alī, in the seventh century BC.[41] During one of his campaigns he is said to have besieged, attacked and plundered the city of Nashān.

an extramural temple constructed against the rocky slope. Dozens of these monuments are known, including sites at Raybūn, Mih, 'Uqran, Suna, Mashgha, al-Hajra, Makaynun, 'Atham, Ba'qutfa and Husn al-Qays. One of the largest of these is the Qays sanctuary, which measures some 38 m in length and 36 m across, with a monumental staircase, open-air terraces, annexes and two principal cubical cellae. In contrast, one of the smallest is Ba'qutfa, which measures only 18 m by 16 m. The excavation of this particular temple yielded eighty-six stone inscriptions, with dedications to the Hadrami god Siyyan using his local epithet 'dhū-Halsum'. If the oldest texts indeed date as early as the seventh century BC as has been suggested, the latest may belong to the first century BC.[45] It seems likely that some of these holy places survived for a long period thereafter and were reused throughout the medieval period: the prophet Hud sanctuary and the Ahmad ibn 'Isa shrine near Say'ūn were both probably founded on the site of pagan temples.[46]

There were many temples in Shabwa, the capital of the Ḥaḍramawt of which the main one was dedicated to Siyyan dhū 'Alim, 'Siyyan who provides ritual meals during pilgrimages'. Inscriptions also testify that other temples were dedicated to dhāt-Ẓahrān, to 'Athtar and possibly an archaic one to 'Almaqah,[47] although archaeological research is still unable to identify clearly each of these. The principal temple, located at one end of the main street, lies on the slopes of Jabal 'Aqab. Nowadays, a monumental staircase, some platforms laid out as terraces and the huge foundations of a statue remain, but neither the cella nor the cultic installations survive. During its later stage of development, in the beginning of our era, this sanctuary was decorated with statues. In the centre stood a monumental bronze statue which probably represented a king. The central staircase was topped by four statues and four bronze-framed pillars whereas there may have been five life-size bronze statues of horsemen on the lower eastern terrace.[48] This decorative programme, so far as we can reconstruct it, seems to owe more to Classical inspiration than a purely local style. The development of South Arabian art should be considered in the context of maritime relations between the Roman world and South Arabia, as the *Periplus* states that 'statues were imported for the king'.[49] Ships may therefore have imported statues via the port of Qāni' to be assembled or set up in Shabwa. However, foreign artists in the service of the kings of Shabwa were also able to cast similar statues, and goldsmiths are described as having produced major gold and silver pieces.[50]

# Architectural elements

## 188 Limestone pillar

The Jawf region

Possibly 8th century BC

H 111 cm, W 28.5 cm

The National Museum, Ṣana'ā', YM 3633

The central decoration consists of a pair of standing female figures with flowing hair, each standing on a plinth, wearing long sleeves and a long skirt decorated with horizontal zigzag patterns, and holding a curved sickle-sword or other implement in their right hands and an unidentified wand-like object in their left hands. The remainder of the lightly incised decorative scheme consists of cross-hatched panels, zigzag patterns, ibex heads and vertical intertwined snakes. This extraordinary decoration has been considered evidence of foreign, even Mesopotamian, artistic influence (e.g. Fakhry 1952, vol. I, 143–6). However, the discovery of identical schemes on three temples known as Banat 'Ad outside Ma'īn, Kharibat Hamdan (ancient Haram) and as-Sawdā' (ancient Nashān) – all in the Jawf – plus Ma'īn itself, al-Bayda', Mārib and al-Jubah, clearly indicate that this is indigenous work and thus these may simply represent a precursor of later South Arabian art (Audouin 1996). As evidence for a well-developed and distinctive architectural decorative tradition as early as the eighth century BC, they help to demonstrate the existence of a thriving local cultural tradition at the beginning of the Iron Age in South Arabia (see cat. 209).

## 189 Limestone architectural ornament

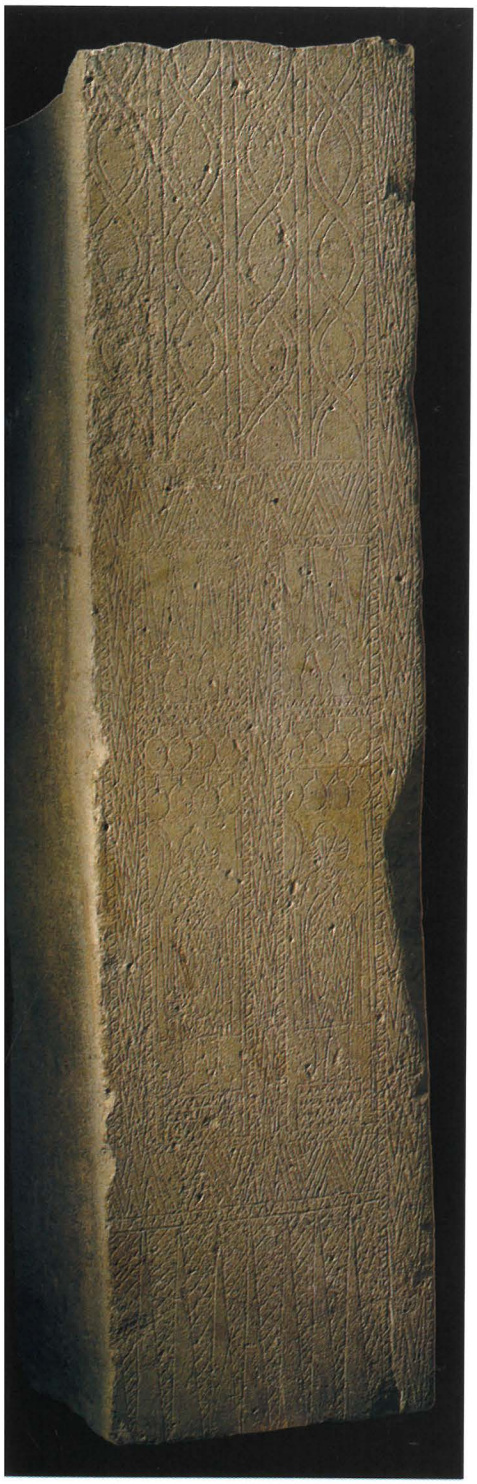
Al-Bayda'

5th century BC

H 51 cm, W 82 cm

The National Museum, Ṣana'ā', YM 10240

The front of this slab is decorated with repeating rows of tall narrow triple recesses which were a common feature on building façades during this period. A similar effect was achieved on earlier buildings in the kingdom of Urartu in eastern Anatolia as well as contemporary Achaemenid tower-temples at Naqsh-e Rustam and Pasargadae in Iran (Stronach 1967); whether or not



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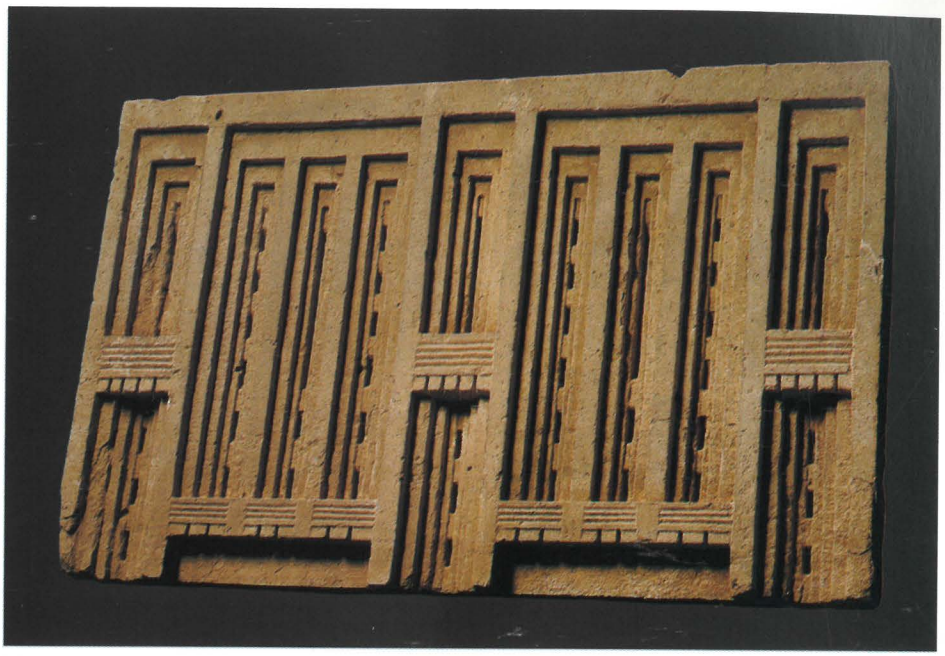

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there is any connection between these traditions, the effect was the same, to create a pleasing alternation of light and deep shadow across otherwise monotonous architectural façades. The same decorative effect was replicated in miniature, for instance on altars and incense burners (see cats 103, 105, 207, 210), as indeed it also was in Urartu (Du Ry 1969, 186).

## 190 Limestone bull's head spout

Mārib, Bar'ān temple

5th century BC

H 22 cm, W 20 cm, TH 17 cm

The Mārib Museum, BAR 205

This powerfully expressive bull's head underlines its importance as a symbol for the god 'Almaqah as it was used within a temple dedicated to the same deity (see also cat. 216).

## 191 Fragment of calcite-alabaster pediment

Mārib

2nd century AD

L 23.6 cm, W 17.2 cm, TH 10 cm

The British Museum, London, ANE 1996-7-13,1

This fragment may originally have belonged to the same building as a well-known fragment of sculpture formerly in the Aden Museum (details of which are illustrated on Yemeni 20 and 100 rial banknotes). This depicts a nude female bust emerging from a vine spray and wearing a beaded necklace and armlets; this scene is set below a triangular pediment decorated with vine scrolls and a presumed pair of antithetical mythical beasts set in the corners above, the right-hand piece of which would be represented by the British Museum fragment; the position of these beasts corresponds to that often filled by winged victories in eastern Roman architecture (e.g. Tanabe ed. 1986, 17, 113–18, pls 73–9). The original appearance of this mythical beast can be reconstructed on the basis of the larger second fragment as a lion or dog-headed animal with wings (as here) and a long curled fish tail, that is being grasped from behind by a nude youth holding an unsheathed sword in his right hand (Pirenne 1957, 103–8, pl. VIIa; Doe 1971, pl. 9). The iconography of this sculpture may be inspired by Classical mythology, and similar marine creatures are shown on Palmyrene tesserae and a temple basin at Baalbek (Seyrig 1934, 168). The goddess figure has again been interpreted in the light of Syrian Classical architecture as the goddess Atargatis, but it is more likely that she represents a local South Arabian deity.

## 192 Calcite-alabaster voussoir

Probably Mārib

H 26.5 cm, W 46 cm, TH 15 cm

The British Museum, London, ANE 1985-2-23,1 = 141532

This central portion of an arch shows an eagle fighting a snake, a monogram, a division line and the paw of a lion; the remainder is unfortunately missing. The presumed mythological significance of this scene is unclear yet the eagle was possibly the symbol of the gods Sayīn, Nasr or Wadd and

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is illustrated on a South Arabian seal in the British Museum where an eagle is shown grasping a snake (ANE 1854-4-1,23 = 120304; Walker 1962, 455–8). The same motif recurs on other architectural fragments including several belonging – like this piece – to the architrave (Rossini 1927, 743; Fakhry 1952, vol. I, 128–9; Doe 1967, 7; Costa 1978, 36–7, pl. XVI, no. 67; Christie's 2001, 12, lot 218).

## 193 Limestone sculpture of a rider with lion skin

Shabwa

H 32 cm, W 24.5 cm, TH 0.6 cm

The Ashmolean Museum, 1952.520

This piece was excavated at Shabwa in 1938 by Major R.A.B. Hamilton (later Lord Belhaven and Stenton), who was posted to Yemen in December 1931 to take command of a camel troop belonging to the Aden Levies. Hamilton served there until 1940 and later published two autobiographical accounts (Hamilton 1949, 1955) which included references to his archaeological interests, plus a novel about Aelius Gallus' failed Roman expedition to southern Arabia in 26/25 BC (Hamilton 1951).[1] Further details on his excavations were published after a lecture he gave to the Royal Geographical Society (Hamilton 1942) and his finds were presented to the Ashmolean Museum in 1952 (Brown and Beeston 1954; see Lush 1998). Hamilton excavated several rooms, one with a staircase, belonging to a building which he mistook for a funerary complex, owing to the lack of connecting doorways and the occurrence of what he took to be human bones. Later research indicates that these rooms belonged to a domestic structure with subterranean basements, possibly originally supporting a multi-storey structure (see also Harding 1964, 38–9, pl. XLI: 6; Doe 1971, 231–2).

Objects found in this building included a cuboid limestone incense burner and a number of fragmentary, sometimes burnt, gypsum slabs decorated with vine scrolls, ridges and furrows, and figural scenes. This last category encompassed bulls' heads, lions

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and human figures, including this interesting piece that shows a horserider wearing a lion-skin cloak that billows out behind him (Brown and Beeston 1954, 48, 62, pl. XIX: fig. 1 = Hamilton 13). Whether this was intended to be a representation of Herakles, the subject of another sculpture from this site and possibly regarded as syncretistic with the South Arabian deity 'Almaqah (Robin and Vogt eds 1997, 214), or whether this was considered to be a sign of rank, as on the earlier statue of Ma'dīkarib (see cat. 24), remains uncertain.[2] A brief South Arabian inscription was later added above the horse's rump, and can be read as 'BHSM'; although the meaning of this is obscure, it remains of interest as a rare instance of an inscription being added in ink rather than being carved directly into the stone. Finally, traces of red, yellow and blue pigment were found on several sculptures, the blue possibly being derived from local indigo although no scientific analysis has yet been undertaken of these pigments.

1 We are grateful to our colleague Christopher Walker for bringing this novel to our attention.

2 Another sculpture from Ẓafār shows a bearded Herakles in a lion-cloak which Tindel (1980, 112) interpreted as evidence of Parthian influence on South Arabian art.

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## 194 Decorated limestone capital

Shabwa, palace, Building B

Mid-3rd century AD

H 46 cm, W 49 cm

The National Museum, Aden, NAM 1218

This capital was erected on one of nine pillars probably sculpted as part of palace reconstruction following a fire in AD 230. The motif of a griffin with one raised forepaw in front of an urn derives from Hellenistic art; it recurs on a stone frieze from Bayḥān (Doe 1971, pl. 12) and is related to depictions on third-century-AD Roman architecture at Palmyra in Syria (Tanabe ed. 1986, 120, 125, pls 81, 87), Parthian cornices from Hatra and Nineveh and as far east as Lou-Lan in Chinese Turkestan (Safar and Mustafa 1974, 347, 381–2, 388; Curtis 1989, 60; Stein 1912, vol. I, 292, fig. 98).

## 195 Marble architectural gutter

Shabwa, palace

3rd century AD

H 62.5 cm, W 25.8 cm, TH 6 cm

The 'Ataq Museum, ATM 145

This gutter with a bull's head spout was probably set in the roof beams of the porticoed palace building at Shabwa. Although it may have helped to channel water away from the wall in the rainy season it probably served a decorative rather than functional role (Breton 1997b, 113).

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## 196 Limestone capital with acanthus leaf decoration

Shibām-Kawkaban

2nd–3rd centuries AD

H 36 cm, W 18 cm, TH 18 cm

The National Museum, Ṣana'ā', YM 24

This capital had a decorative rather than structural function and although influenced by Classical architecture it differs in the details and proportions, the leaves being arranged directly above each other rather than placed randomly as with the Classical prototypes. Funerary stelae depict acanthus leaf capitals surmounting fluted columns and supporting broad arches (e.g. Seipel ed. 1998, 336, 338, no. 291; see cat. 142).

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## 197 Limestone architectural fragment

Qāni'

End of the 2nd–4th centuries AD

H 16.4 cm, D 7.5 cm (max.)

The 'Ataq Museum, ATM 328

This fragment was found in the ruins of a temple where it had presumably been employed as architectural decoration. The zoomorphic motifs of lions and mythical beasts have been interpreted as evidence for Iranian influence, yet the vine scroll suggests Graeco-Roman models and the linear style of the figures points to local manufacture (Seipel ed. 1998, 381).

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## 198 Limestone inscription commemorating the construction of a palace by Abyssinian ambassadors

(Not illustrated)

Ẓafār

AD 510

H 46 cm, W 63 cm, TH 8 cm

The Ẓafār Museum, ZM 579

This inscription commemorates the construction by Abyssinian ambassadors of a palace with a sculpted and polished stone entrance. The inscription reads:

> [...] with gratitude to Raḥmānān, the Lord of the sky, and by [...] of their Lord King Marthad'īlān Yanūf. Shegā' and his sons Wadfā and Asbehā, the envoys, have erected and completed their house Shab'ān from its foundations to its roof, and have erected within it an entrance of polished and hewn stones. By the grace of Raḥmānān. In the month dhū-Ma'ūn of the year six hundred and nineteen.

Based on the names of the individuals mentioned in the text, the authors of this inscription were Abyssinian ambassadors. The inscription is dated to the month dhū-Ma'ūn of the year 619 of the Ḥimyarite era, which corresponds to March AD 510. The monogram in the middle of lines four and five can be broken down into the letters WDFH, corresponding to the Ethiopian name Wadfā (Seipel ed. 1998, 379).